

Ah ... Paul. So many words. So many theological concepts to try and parse out.

This snippet we have heard is from Paul's letter to the budding Christian community in Galatia – a region in the central area of modern-day Turkey. Today we're going to do our best to work with one theological gem called "justification by faith," which is introduced in this letter.

To be "justified" – Greek, *δικαιόω* (*dee-kah-YAH-oh*), means "to render righteous, or to render such as one ought to be."

So the idea that we are exploring today is that we can be rendered such as we ought to be through faith.

Let's start out with that big thought – what does it mean for us to "be as we ought to be?" I'd love to break into little groups and have you talk that one out with your neighbors. By I'm guessing that wouldn't be a popular request, so I'll ask you to consider: what does it mean for us to "be as we ought to be?"

My knee-jerk list are these: Being given room to grow into the creatures God made us to be; Being placed in a community that cares for and nurtures us, that challenges us and supports us, that helps us identify our faults and grow into better human beings; an environment where we know we are loved, and where we can express our love for others; and, finally having opportunity to laugh and to make others laugh.

Would we say that normal, everyday life affords us to fully be as we ought to be?
Would we say that we ourselves give ourselves and one another permission to be fully as we ought to be?

That's a rhetorical question, because the answer is usually "no." There is within ourselves, and within the cultures into which we have been reared, a brokenness woven into our/their fabric. It's the rare person who is fully comfortable in their own skin. The human being is a curious construct - capable of creating the most beautiful of things, and also capable of causing the most painful of damage. And as culture after culture have been developed, most are built on the backs of others, with many lines of division drawn to characterize people in a plethora of ways.

I was talking with my sister the other day, and she shared a psycho/spiritual tradition she is currently studying that regards the truth of interpersonal relationships being knit around the reality of a force of loving-kindness that is available to us. As she said, "many people call that 'God,' but this group's school of thought doesn't want to limit the idea to the "character" people associate with "God." For too many, "God" has negative or oppressive connotations.

The ancient Hebrews discerned that force of loving-kindness as Yahweh - the one revealed to Moses as *I am that I am*.

As Moses developed a relationship with this god, and introduced *I AM* to the community that would eventually become the People of Israel, they became aware that they individually and collectively were stunted; and that there was another way for them to live so that they, individually and collectively, could be

who they ought to be. This Yahweh had told their progenitors, Abram and Sarai, that they were meant to be a blessing to the world. Following the Way of Yahweh could help them be just that, and so began a long and complicated covenant relationship with Yahweh. The Hebrew community took on the laws and commands that structured their life together.

The problem was the systems they created around the covenant became idols, such that they had trouble keeping the spirit of the law – which was built on reciprocal love with Yahweh and neighbors. They were so caught up in keeping the letter of the laws that they found permission to condemn those they deemed as operating outside of the law. This caused a whole culture of judgement. No one can be as they ought to be when such systems are in place.

It is clear, in Paul's letter, that such a system is still in play. In this instance, the character of judgement seems to be around the acceptance of gentiles as heirs of this covenant as it has been newly constituted through the reality of Jesus the Christ. But the questions abound, "Do they need to be Jews first to be Christians?" Or, "Can gentiles accept faith in Christ without adhering to the laws of Judaism?"

It's an interesting peek into the nature of religious groups once they start creating structured order. In the letter, Paul talks about how he called out Peter/Cephas for backtracking on his behavior with gentiles. I mentioned last week that it was Peter who broke through the kosher/non-kosher barrier by eating with and then baptizing the household of an Italian Centurion. Apparently, Peter made a habit of breaking kosher laws in order to teach people

about Jesus the Christ. That is until, according to Paul, Peter was influenced by a faction of Old Guard Apostles led by James who frowned upon such fraternization with gentiles, and Peter reversed course and quit eating with them. Paul has had very positive experiences with non-Jewish-influenced gentiles who received the Spirit of Christ and were living Jesus' ethic of love. Paul sees Peter's reversal as ludicrous behavior, and deems him a hypocrite.

In between the first and second generation of apostles we are seeing lines being drawn in schools of thought. These camps have the feeling of what we now know of as denominations. All of us are Christians, yet we use different ideological differences to separate ourselves from one another – even to the point of there being a lack of understanding that we are all following the same Christ! How often do I hear people refer to “The Catholic Religion” as opposed to folks like us? As if somehow we do not all share a confession in Christ as Sovereign and Savior!

I'm sure that while Paul was calling out Peter he was sure that he was preaching Christ and baptizing in the Spirit the right way. *His understanding* was pure, and he needed other people to catch up to *his* way of thinking, or get out of the way. This is clearly in his feelings about having to adhere to Jewish law in order to be as one ought to be as a follower of Jesus.

And here's where we get into the big, hairy theological concept that Paul drops in this text. It's not through the law that one is justified, but rather, by the faith of Christ. As Paul writes,

16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ.

“Justified by the faith of Christ,” or, as some translations say, by the faith in Christ. And here, due to a difference in translating a preposition, we have another great theological quandary:

- By faith in Christ, do we have to live wholly, faithful lives in order to be reconciled with God, or,
- Is it by the faith of Christ, was Jesus’ faith in God that led him throughout his life, his passion, his death, and finally into resurrection – is it Christ’s faith that reconciles us with God? With our summons being to trust in Christ in order for us to reconcile with God?

Knowing myself, I am much more at ease with the understanding that there aren’t hoops I have to be able to jump through or standards that I have to measure up to in order to “be as I ought” in God’s eyes. I prefer to believe that the task of my life is to understand that Jesus the Christ knew the broken state of our lives and lived and taught in a manner that I may aspire to emulate. And as I try to live with an intentional active love of God then I am doing what I can to grasp a deeper knowledge of God, and God’s desire for my life.

Early Church ancestor, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) coined a phrase that many Christians have clung to: “faith seeking understanding.” What Anselm meant by that is as we allow our faith to inform the way we live our lives, as we

seek to more closely emulate the way Jesus lived, the more we grow in understanding for how we ought to be.

There's a well known prayer by 20th Century American Trappist monk Thomas Merton, begins this way:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
{The whole prayer can be found [here](#).}

Merton's desire speaks to my own. I appreciate his humility in knowing that he cannot fully understand what pleases God. The best we can do is try our best to follow the example of Jesus by loving God, loving neighbor, and loving ourselves – especially in the midst of such a world of complexity and upside down values.

I can't promise you that this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he spoke about being justified by the faith of Christ. But I think the bottom line is that each of us is called to seek a deeper understanding of who God is as we try to

understand who God most earnestly wants us to be. Not to meet some “benchmark of faith,” but rather to be as full of knowledge that we are beloved creatures of the One who made us, claims us, redeems us, and calls us to be a blessing in the world.

May we desire to be and to do so knowing that in all the circumstances life gives us the grace of God accompanies us, as it has from the beginning. Amen.